



John Ford: A Reassessment

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MICHAEL DEMPSEY

John Ford:

A REASSESSMENT

"Visually beautiful, otherwise not very interesting," wrote James Agee about a John Ford epic of the forties. Today this remark is undoubtedly "dated" to those who have since turned Ford into a sacred cow. Nobody will deny that he is one of the few directors to have put his own world on film—coherently and in detail—despite the restrictions of the studio system. Such writings as John Baxter's and J. A. Place's book-length studies* have mapped this world painstakingly. But they have also done little more than take it at face value, as though its mere existence constituted proof of great artistry. The myth of Ford's great artistry badly needs a challenge. As Raymond Durnat has commented, "The fact that a director has an 'individual' style doesn't of itself make his films interesting (except to those connoisseurs who collect odd styles like some people collect quaintly-shaped inkpots)."

The Sun Shines Bright (1953), which the director preferred to his other films, is a good place to begin. As an example of "late" Ford, which is supposed to be deeper and more melancholy than the earlier movies, it is certainly bleaker than its cheery, ambling predecessor, *Judge Priest* (1934). In each the judge, a good old boy who has more or less run a Southern town for years, faces defeat at the hands of a slicker politician. Both films end with rousing parades celebrating the judge's victory. But what in *Judge Priest* is a frolic becomes a virtual requiem in *The Sun Shines Bright*. Ford's shadowy, nocturnal images suffuse the parade with

sadness, and his measured editing carefully draws out the mood. We know that this is the last triumph of the old order. *The Sun Shines Bright* is a penumbral film, keyed to sorrow and loss even amid joy.

At any rate, this is the flattering way to describe it, if you take its intentions for its achievements. If you don't, then it becomes, in Durnat's words, a "male weepie." The movie's problem is not political fantasy but emotional facility; it never stops telling you what to feel. In the reunions of Priest's old Confederate unit, in his stand before the jailhouse door against a lynch mob, in a prostitute's funeral cortege rolling wordlessly through town with the townspeople marching behind it—in almost every scene, the movie plays shamelessly on our most ready-made responses. Ford mourns the old soldiers, backs up the judge, cries over the dead woman for us; our reactions have been built into the picture in advance.

Yet its assumptions and devices are highly questionable. If Priest defends a black boy from a gang of homicidal crackers who want to string him up for rape, naturally the boy must be innocent and one of the crackers guilty, while the rest of the vigilantes must troop into town on election day to vote the judge back in because "he saved us from ourselves." Weak-kneed liberalism wobbles home free again. During the prostitute's funeral, a local potentate, General Fairfield, finally acknowledges her as his ex-mistress and Priest's ward, Lucy Lee, as their daughter. We are obviously supposed to find the general's remorse touching and fall into the movie's penitential mood. But how can we when his unadmitted pride and puritanism caused the woman's death in the first place? The local blacks don't march behind the hearse; although some of them tended the prostitute in her final illness, they know their place—outside the door of the church—and take it with excruciat-

*John Baxter, *The Cinema of John Ford* (Zwemmer-Barnes) and J. A. Place, *The Western Films of John Ford* (Citadel).

ing humility. Even in a fantasy like this, Ford never considers putting them in the procession; he is too much the true believer in the status quo to question its contradictions very trenchantly. And in a clumsy bow to moral and religious orthodoxy, Lucy Lee's suave suitor must bend a knee and declare himself a sinner, even though his look of granite nobility never develops so much as a hairline crack throughout the movie.

Is this a searching analysis of American society, a wilit meditation on community, morality, tradition, family, religion, militarism, and julep-dipped Irishness? Only if personal equals profound and kitsch art. Other films could also serve the purpose, but *The Sun Shines Bright* is a compendium of Ford's persistent inadequacies as an artist. At his worst, he is an emotional vulgarian who lays on his ideas and feelings like a buffet supper. He touches the themes cited above, but too frequently he touches them as though they were pushbuttons. Which, in a sense, they are; for just by being alive we are all vulnerable to them, and even inept treatments of them can make us respond. Very often Ford sells "forgiveness" by the yard, trowels on "compassion" like cement. If he wants a bit of last-stand gallantry, he will drag in an old man, put a rifle in his hand, and plant him on a porch where, to the strains of "Red River Valley," he will fight the Japanese Army single-handed (*They Were Expendable*, 1945). If he wants

an image of death and loss, he will cook up a howling, windswept desert funeral (*Three Godfathers*, 1948), as though a few striking shots alone could pump meaning into religious slop. Visually beautiful, otherwise not very interesting—contrary to those who think that, film being a visual medium, the former cannot fail to be the latter.

These are just a few random samples from Ford's work, and many are bound to feel that they have been selected arbitrarily, that more outrageous ones could be found. And so they could. The point is not that all of Ford is like this but that too much of it is. *The Sun Shines Bright*, *Three Godfathers*, *The Long Voyage Home*, *The Wings of Eagles*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *The Quiet Man*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Drums Along the Mohawk*: these and many others, whatever the virtues of some, can illustrate Agee's point about *They Were Expendable*. The flaws of *The Sun Shines Bright* are not the aberrations of one Ford film; they are the hallmarks of almost all.

In themselves, these weaknesses are not necessarily so serious. Many major artists, like Dickens and Chaplin, indulged in them without destroying their work. But few of Ford's films as a whole possess either the challenging complexity or the luminous simplicity which could reduce them to blemishes. His America is basically a child's fantasy preserved in the aspic of his

JUDGE
PRIEST:
Precursor
to
THE SUN
SHINES
BRIGHT





MY DARLING CLEMENTINE

horizon shots and scenic vistas. Though Baxter has tried strenuously to demonstrate the opposite, Ford is essentially a folk artist who gives us the simple evocations of heroism, defeat, community, rural virtue, religion, family life, civilization, and myth which idealistic children derive from their enthrallment with their history books and Bible stories. *My Darling Clementine* (1946) ranks among Ford's most beautiful achievements of this kind; it is moving as an elegant, moody ballad on the rise of civilization in the wilderness but feeble if mistaken for a profound study of the process. Despite erratic, often desperate efforts in some of his later movies, Ford's visionary idealism remains generally naive and untested—probably indispensable at some level to artistic creativity and, up to a point, appealing, but incapable of assimilating its contradictions or even acknowledging their existence.

Examples minor and major come to mind too readily. Baxter cites Ford's adoring iconography of General MacArthur in *They Were Expendable*, heroically evacuating only a minimal staff from the Philippines during World War II, when in fact he packed the PT boats with officers and their factotums. As Baxter admits, Ford could not incorporate the truth into his idealization. More elaborately, *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) gives us the "Lincoln of our dreams," as Pauline Kael has put it. From the movie's stately pacing, affectionate tableaux of Americana, homey heroism, and shrewd hindsight, we pick up the signals of this gawky, raw youth's latent stature. Henry Fonda's performance—with its self-conscious self-deprecation, its abstracted stare into

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tomorrow, and its bumbling yet floating dignity—creates a mythic portrait of the American. On this ingenuous and charming level, the film is extremely beautiful. But it turns to mush whenever it tries to motivate Lincoln through maudlin images of Mother and Family; even the famous scene between him and his soon-to-be-dead sweetheart, Ann Rutledge, falls somewhat flat because Pauline Moore, who plays the part, reads her lines inexpressively. When a more complex woman appears, the sleek and emasculating Mary Todd, Ford cannot account for Lincoln's attraction to her; his storybook hero has nothing in him to explain it. The *Cahiers du Cinéma* collective study of the film may find a castration motif in this and other incidents, but clearly Ford had neither control nor awareness of it.

Ford's films deal more often and more directly with primal American themes than anybody else's do; but since they seldom measure up to the themes, they are more vulnerable to history. Many have compared Ford to Whitman, but the comparison does not favor Ford. It is one thing to say they both sought less the literal truth than the truth of myth, but on most occasions Ford shows far less ability than Whitman to distinguish between the two. It is one thing for a nineteenth-century poet to enshrine the myth of America's unique nobility but quite another for a twentieth-century film-maker to repeat the process, and on an infinitely more sentimental and commercially bastardized level, as though American history had stood still since the Civil War. Even in Ford's heyday, let alone in recent



YOUNG MR. LINCOLN ▶

THE GRAPES
OF WRATH



decades, the impossible Whitmanesque ideal had been perverted often enough to give any thoughtful person pause. But Ford the contemporary of Faulkner gives us sticky Southern Edens full of plastic magnolia trees and sashaying darkies. Ford the contemporary of Dreiser and Dos Passos and even Steinbeck gives us, in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), a hollow celebration of that emptiest abstraction, The People, along with a cop-out analysis which avoids blaming any individual or interest for the plight of the Okies. Ford the contemporary of Joyce serves up a little but watery mulligan stew at his Irish-American table. In some of the later films, Ford expresses pain and confusion over changes in his America; but for the most part he endorses—often complacently—every official piety, religious, social, and political. Baxter writes (p. 9), “On the level of invention at which he works, ideology is irrelevant.” Baxter is wrong—on both counts.

One especially striking aspect of Ford's work is its abundance of Indians, blacks, and Orientals, who far outnumber the nonwhite characters in the films of his fellow directors. But Ford's responses to them complicate his simple communal idealism. Most of his communities are all-white, but a significant number are at least nominally multiracial. In several films, he tries (often unconsciously, it appears) for images of racial and social harmony among diverse peo-

ple. During the hilarious climax to *Steamboat Round the Bend* (1935) Stepin Fetchit teams up with a basso profundo Bible thumper, a swamp girl, a drunk, and a snake-oil salesman to win a race down the Mississippi. *The Searchers* (1956) turns upon the abduction of a white girl by a Comanche whom she eventually marries. *Wagon Master* (1950) gracefully unites Mormons and Indians in communal peace. Two films set in the Pacific, *The Hurricane* (1937) and *Donovan's Reef* (1963), edge towards Polynesian utopias: in the first, the whites envy the islanders and compare them to birds; in the second, whites of several nationalities join Orientals to form a ramshackle community.

In the hands of a more thoughtful director, these premises could have led to provocative examinations of racial tension without necessarily denying the possibility of such communal bliss. But Ford is invariably paternalistic; he wants to “do right,” but he cannot escape his own innate condescension. Robin Wood (*Film Comment*, Fall 1971) and Baxter have described the roles of his Indians: part of the scenery and plot (*Stagecoach*, 1939), unconscious symbols of the erupting Id (*She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, 1949; *Rio Grande*, 1950; *The Searchers*), “good” savages (the hero's friend in *Drums Along the Mohawk*, 1939; the old chief in *Yellow Ribbon* who laments the destructiveness of war; the fugitives of *Cheyenne Autumn*, 1964).

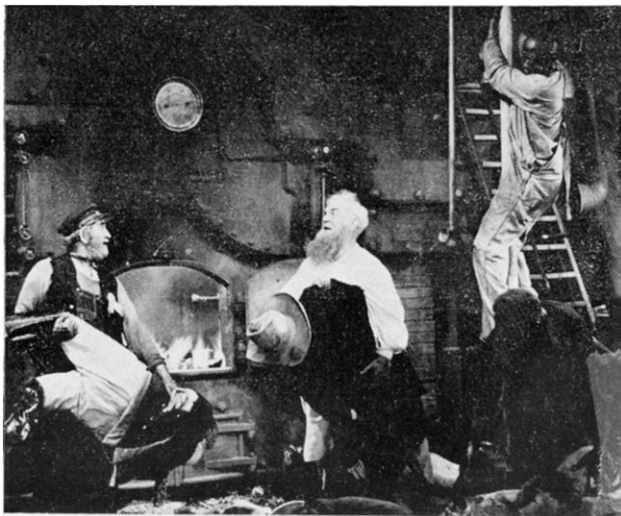
Most of Ford's blacks lack even the cigar store dignity of the Indians. Stepin Fetchit (a character and a pseudonym of Lincoln Perry) is the obvious example, with his wheedling, his word-swallowing whine, his vacant gape and bulgy-eyed servility, his slack-limbed shuffle and cringing contortions. Paradoxically, Fetchit is such a stock figure in America's hall of racial infamy that many people may have forgotten or may never have seen for themselves just how dehumanized he is forced to be, how his extreme submissiveness makes him practically a vegetable. Lately, some critics and Perry himself have said that these gruesome exhibitions parody white racism obliquely. Their evidence tends to include his equally caricatured co-stars, Will Roger's comic imitation of his voice in one scene of *Judge Priest*, and his goofy antics as David-Begat-Solomon tumbling out of a papier-mâché whale in *Steamboat Round the Bend*. These are, God knows, unique feats of acting (or rug-chewing), and they certainly do indict racism. But this is really just a rationalization, clever but hopeless. Fetchit's white co-stars may also be caricatured, but not along racial lines, and none descends to his subhuman cretinism. Neither an innocuous comic grotesque like Francis Ford's baccy-spitting old coot in *Judge Priest* nor an ethereal ninny-sage like Hank Worden's Old Mose in *The Searchers*, Stepin Fetchit makes us squirm at his own enforced abasement.

The closest that Ford comes to a sympathetic, unsteretyped black is Pompey, Tom Donophon's servant in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), and he is a soft wax statue of goodness like the Indians of *Cheyenne Autumn*. Neither gets far beyond the extras of *Arrow-smith* (1931), in which the hero tests a new yellow fever serum on black Caribbeans during an epidemic after whites refuse to take the risk, or *The Prisoner of Shark Island* (1936), in which Dr. Samuel Mudd frightens black guards into helping him combat malaria by playing on their superstitions. Nominally, each group of blacks is heroic; actually, they are just stereotypes—ignorant, hoodooed pickaninnies—who (particularly in *Shark Island*) pass from gibbering idiocy to plaster sanctity without contamina-

tion by mere humanity. Even an impersonal romance like *Mogambo* (1953) shows Ford's fear of the tribesmen he seeks to dignify, as one protracted war dance reveals.

Towards Orientals, Ford's films take a simpler but still ambiguous tone. His Orientals do not become the slant-eyed savages of war films like *Bataan*, which gloat over impossibly evil "Jap" predecessors of Vietnam's "gooks." By not showing any Japanese at all, *They Were Expendable*, to Ford's eternal credit, avoids blood-thirsty images of their slaughter. His concentration on images of defeat, loss, weariness, and death makes this ostensibly morale-boosting production unusually tentative and understated for its genre. But these qualities may also stem from an inability to take Orientals seriously. Unlike Indians and blacks (and even after Vietnam, let alone in Ford's time), they are not so immense a part of America's guilty conscience; and so, unable to inspire terror, they cannot challenge Ford's vision of American righteousness.

As a result, Ford's innate paternalism makes them trivial, like the Filipinos in one brief instant of *Expendable* who run around babbling "Jap come, Jap come," or ingenuous, like Terangi of *The Hurricane*. He earns the admiration of whites for his intrepid escapes from the prisons in which a French martinet tries to hold him on a trumped-up charge. At the same time, his fellow islanders beguile the white colonialists with their carefree mores. But Ford evades all issues in the end by patting them on



STEAMBOAT ROUND THE BEND ►

the head like infants, sweet and charming in their naiveté but not to be taken seriously as alternatives or contributors to white civilization. Even the movie's smashing climax, a horrendous typhoon linked by the islanders to outraged gods, arises not to make us have any regard for their beliefs but to improve the martinet's character (inadequately developed in the first place) by drowning a few bit players and making some waves in the studio tank. Although it was released 26 years later, *Donovan's Reef* is no more sophisticated: its Hawaiians are cute children, its Chinese are comic dummies, and its moral dilemma (will starchy Bostonian Amelia accept her father's children by a native woman?) is utterly cut-and-dried. American movies as diverse as *Nanook of the North*, *Grass*, *Tabu*, and, recently, Philip Kaufman's *The White Dawn* depict other cultures with a respect and a depth of feeling which Ford never approaches.

Ford's idolators have generally dodged this strain of "benign" racism in his work, much as D. W. Griffith's champions often softpeddle the racism in *The Birth of a Nation*. Agee himself wrote that Griffith in this film understood blacks "as a good kind of Southerner does." Surprised and stung by protests against the film, Griffith poured all his resources into *Intolerance* and later, in *Hearts of the World*, showed a black soldier and a white soldier kissing each other as a gesture of common humanity. These sincere but woefully inadequate ploys indicate a racism that stems not from the fanatical hatred of, say, a Klansman or a segregationist but from a kind of simple-minded, provincial innocence. Both Griffith and Ford lacked the imagination to transcend the racial stereotypes of their periods. Griffith's black rapist in *The Birth of a Nation*, pawing virginal Lillian Gish, and Ford's Debbie in *The Searchers*, returning to the white world even after she has become spiritually an Indian, are typical products of this deficiency, in which moral and artistic failures are inseparable.

Ford's portrayals of women betray a comparable inadequacy; collectively, they bear out Leslie Fiedler's famous thesis about the inability

of many American artists to deal maturely with love and death. The vast majority of Ford's women are as mired in stereotypes as his non-whites; they exist only in relation to men, whom they mother, feed, comfort, and bury. These functions add up to their only true role in life; they rarely do anything for their own sakes, nor do they really have lives of their own. The men feel genuine reverence for them but also, at bottom take them for granted. They are marked by all the negative implications of "pedestalism"; their glorification effectively removes them from "masculine" areas of life. Being idols, they are not fully human, need not be taken with true seriousness.

Within these limits (which are, of course, social as well as personal), many Ford women are appealing and heroic. In the best moment of *Drums Along the Mohawk*, Magdalena (Claudette Colbert) stands at the crest of a hill, her dress whipping in the breeze as she gazes down at a thin column of departing colonial troops, one of them her husband. The otherwise disastrous *Long Gray Line* (1955) contains a similar flash of intensity: Mary Maher (Maureen O'Hara), her face ashen with grief, staring after her surrogate son as he strides away along a rural lane towards World War II. The war itself provided Ford with the opportunity to create one of his most effective women, Donna Reed's stoic, strong, radiant military nurse in *They Were Expendable*. An episode of her waltzing with John Wayne's PT boat officer beneath a lacy curtain of light and shadow is Fordian romanticism at its most beautiful. In *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), the Morgan women (Mrs. Morgan, daughter Angharad, and daughter-in-law Bronwen, played by Sara Algood, Maureen O'Hara—at her best here—and Anna Lee) are poignant embodiments of steadfastness and courage.

But, for the most part, his are simply "waiting women" whether they are wives, mothers, daughters, or prostitutes. So are Joyce's women; but they have individual facets and depths far beyond Ford's generally coy, angelic abstractions of Holy Womanhood. The daughters in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *The Sun Shines Bright*

(with demure Arleen Whelan giving almost the same performance in each despite a gap of 14 years), *My Darling Clementine*, *The Hurricane*, and *Judge Priest*, among others, are little more than porcelain figurines. The prostitutes of such films as *Clementine*, *Sun*, *The Informer*, and *Stagecoach* are scarcely less pristine and equally uninteresting. Much of this unreal purity must be charged off to censorship, but Ford was comfortable with it; witness Margaret Leighton's scenery-gulping lesbian in *Seven Women* (1966). As the "hearts" of their homes (to paraphrase a description of Mrs. Morgan by her youngest son), Ford's wives and mothers have more substance but vary widely in appeal. Some are gooey: Helen Hayes's fragile blossom in *Arrowsmith*, who sickens (and finally dies) with suspiciously perfect timing at each new stage of her husband's career; Jane Darwell's Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, a mawkish family bulwark and earth mother of us all; Mildred Natwick's dying madonna in *Three Godfathers*, a mere tearjerker; Alice Brady's widow in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, quivering with piety; Dolores Del Rio's belle of St. Mary in *The Fugitive*. Others escape the overbearing sentimentality of these characters: Ethan Edward's sister-in-law Martha in *The Searchers*; Vera Miles's Hallie, the romantic prize of *Liberty Valance*; Vera Allen's Janet, the town physician's platonic, motherly friend and eventual spouse in *Doctor Bull*. Between these extremes lie—quite literally—the dead wives whose graves or portraits Ford has their widowers address in *Doctor Bull*, *Judge Priest*, and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. Appropriately, each has vanished before the movies begin, the better to serve as a remote icon whose earthly virtues we are expected to take on faith.

Even apparent exceptions do not really disrupt the cloying pattern. They tend to be secret marshmallows like Mildred Natwick's Irish matriarch in *The Quiet Man* and Edna May Oliver's flinty old bat in *Drums Along the Mohawk* or "spunky" counterfeits of sexuality like Shirley Jones's pig-tailed teenager in *Two Rode Together* and Maureen O'Hara's raven-haired bride in *The Quiet Man*. Other variants are the puritanical, gossipy biddies who make safe tar-

gets in *Doctor Bull*, *Judge Priest*, *Steamboat Round the Bend*, and *Donovan's Reef*. Faced with a more virulent puritanism, the communal ostracism of Angharad in *How Green Was My Valley* after she seeks a divorce, Ford fudges the issue by leaving it unresolved. Occasionally, he will present figures like Myrna Loy's slinky adventuress, who tempts young Doctor Arrow-smith, or Ava Gardner's irreverent international playgirl, who amuses herself (and wins the audience's allegiance) throughout *Mogambo* by needling Grace Kelly's frosty married prig. Maybe these two are minor manifestations of what Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington (*Film Comment*, Spring 1972) have found to be full-blown in *Seven Women*, the idealist's suppressed desire to see his idols fall.

But, except in *Seven Women*, they never really do. With these saintly tintypes mated to Ford's stolid heroes, it is no wonder that the love relationships in his films are so often insipid. Robin Wood has an explanation for this: "... Ford tends to sublimate sexual attraction into either gallantry or heartiness: the relationships positively presented are always strictly 'wholesome' and honorable. Romance and courtship have their own rules, and sexual love is never regarded as a value in itself." (*Film Comment*, Fall 1971, p. 13) A cogent statement but, apart from not improving Ford's more puerile romances, also an incomplete one. More is involved than just a personal hierarchy of values (or appeasement of the audience's desire for amorous sentimentality): sensuality, love, passion, sex make Ford intensely uneasy. Over and over again, he gives us blushing swains and simpering maidens straight out of mid-Victorian valentines; even after marriage, many of them behave like embarrassed teenagers at a square dance. In *The Long Gray Line*, Maureen O'Hara must imitate a jet bomber, sweeping her arms back as she puckers up to Tyrone Power in one of the most stupefying howlers ever palmed off as a love scene. Later, when he learns of her pregnancy, he must grin with amazement, as though he truly couldn't imagine whodunit, or how. Faced with marital strife in *The Wings of Eagles* (1957), Ford resorts to

equally lame clichés, among them the memorable moment when O'Hara (who must have risked a whiplash playing the scene) gets snapped around by John Wayne for a kiss. In *The Searchers*, Jeffrey Hunter and Vera Miles play Post Office; in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, two peach-fuzzed lieutenants squabble over glacéed Joanne Dru.

Of this sickly roundelay, Baxter writes: "*She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* dramatizes the fact that private responsibility to universal standards of community must transcend arbitrary military rules, and in the romance of Olivia and Flint suggests that the next generation, while honoring the men who upheld them, may discard entirely the beliefs by which their elders lived." (p. 79) By the same process of embroidering the possible intention and ignoring the actual achievement, the others, too, can be invested with comparable significance. But the inept execution of each episode—especially the stilted, mugging performances—tells another story: of the macho male's queasiness about intimacy and equality with women.

Like racial paternalism, the sexual paternalism of machismo is a more important element in Ford's work than many want to admit. In much of it, regardless of his conscious intentions, manliness implicitly means fighting, yelling, drinking, and—however reverentially—dominating women. Nearly every American director who has worked extensively in the outdoor action genres has ladled up his share of macho mush. But those critics who, for example, are always zeroing in on Sam Peckinpah's tortured ceremonies of maleness never seem to notice Ford's, possibly because, glazed over with a solemnity that can pass for Tradition or Ritual, they are complacently untortured. Peckinpah wrestles with his complexes and, at his best, makes powerful drama out of the struggle; Ford usually does no more than affirm his as if they were eternal verities.

Two comments by Baxter make the point succinctly, though not the point he intended to make:

... pugnacity and drunkenness are regularly employed as symbols of pleasure and release, indissolubly linked

with honesty, integrity, and community spirit.

Although, to Ford, the traits of "Irishness" can appear in any country or community, their most effective symbol is the character of Victor McLaglen, a personification of noisy, violent, drunken, but lovable Ireland . . . (p. 49)

But Baxter overlooks Ford's grossly sentimental handling of these motifs, especially the barroom bruisers and good ould sods who overpopulate so many of his movies. *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* wastes endless footage on McLaglen simpering over a jug hidden in his commander's office or demolishing a gin mill when soldiers try to clap him in the brig. In *The Wings of Eagles*, lusty gobs keep conking each other gleefully. The two lummoxes of *Donovan's Reef*, Guns and Boats, start denting each other's skulls every time they meet, and Guns subdues uppity Amelia with a spanking. In themselves, brawls and benders like these and numerous others in Ford's work are just traditional genre elements, which is precisely why they cannot effectively express the meanings which Baxter attributes to them. Instead of "honesty, integrity, and community spirit," they express infantilism, stupidity, and machismo. They are too hackneyed to express anything else in a serious context.

One could argue that machismo, whatever its overt thematic role in Ford's lesser films, functions in them mainly as corny comic relief, like the silly, amusing saloon demolition in Peckinpah's *Junior Bonner*. But in a major work like *The Searchers*, it does real damage. Ethan Edward's long quest for his kidnapped niece marks him as the avenger of a family and a community even though he cannot truly join either. It also renders him a racist neurotic. For most of this majestic and disturbing film, Ford maintains an extraordinary tension between these two perspectives, making Ethan his most complex and fascinating hero by far. But, in the end, the tension slackens as unexamined macho assumptions take over. The Indians, poorly directed, look like beasts or buffoons; and although the grown-up Debbie refuses at first to leave the tribe, she meekly acquiesces when Ethan lifts her angrily but then gracefully swings her into his arms. This celebrated gesture beautifully



THE SEARCHERS

expresses the exorcism of his murderous rage by familial reverence; it is the perfect climax to the film's study of his tortured ambivalence. But it cannot clear up the muddy, evasive treatment of Debbie.

We never know why she returns to the white community. In one of the weak spots of an excellent essay on the film (*Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1971), McBride and Wilmington cite her memories of her childhood, but how can they compel her allegiance in preference to years of Indian life from childhood to marriage? She mentions them; but we never see them, nor can Natalie Wood make us believe that Debbie is all the richer for having lived in both worlds. Her story somewhat resembles the case of Cynthia Ann Parker, who was captured in 1836 and raised by Comanches, married to one, then retaken in 1860 along with her infant daughter (her son escaping to become Chief Quanah Parker, who is portrayed in *Two Rode Together*). Within a few months, she and the girl died. Captivity literature is extensive; and, even though much of it must be read with an informed skepticism, it reveals a wide variety of white captives' experiences among and reactions to Indians. As a reputed authority on the West, Ford must surely have known about these writings. Yet he fails to motivate Debbie's final choice convincingly; he simply cannot conceive of her making any other.

As he does elsewhere, Ford here attempts a gesture of reconciliation: Debbie returning to the white community still dressed as a squaw.

HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY ►

FORD: A REASSESSMENT

But because the movie offers no evidence of true cultural reconciliation, this is just an empty symbol. And what is this community into which she is being reintegrated? Another gang of pier-sixing, leg-chawing idiots whose unfunny antics, mingled with dim romantic comedy, supposedly represent a warm hearth of humanity in an indifferent universe. In making them more grotesque than usual, Ford may have wanted to poke some fun at the brawling boyos, or perhaps he felt that this knockabout farce would best express the communal spirit he sought. Either way, he miscalculated badly enough to make his community totally uninviting. If these morons are the best he can offer, who wouldn't prefer to wander away with Ethan from their closed door?

Ford's machismo is rooted in his Irishness, which he never does more than merely celebrate. His Ireland lacks the resonance of Monument Valley. Noisy but nice, violent but innocuous, drunken but childlike, it is a fantasy realm of chlorophyll, hearty boozers, impromptu chorales, fiery colleens, and relentless religiosity. Artists may not reasonably be criticized for expressing their fantasies, unless they are as conventional as Ford's Emerald Isle. Even tintured at times with overtones of memory and loss (the primary mood of *How Green Was My Valley*, whose Welsh characters, like most of Ford's Southerners, are really Irish in mufti), this Eire almost totally hides the bleaker aspects of its



people's history. Ford gives us pubs full of hay-makers and choirboys, but no Citizen bilious with rage on Bloomsday; dells full of picturesque livestock, but no "old sow that eats her farrow."

Ford's two principal movies with overtly Irish settings, *The Informer* and *The Quiet Man*, both suffer from his artistic paralysis before his own shibboleths. By now, most film-goers know how overrated *The Informer* was when it was first released in 1935 as a rare "art film" from the commercial factories. Nevertheless, this official classic, in its ponderous and schematic way, does convey at least a shadow of the Irish night through Gypo Nolan's guilt-ridden wanderings and maunderings, whereas *The Quiet Man* (1952) settles for pale sunlight. Its hero, Sean Thornton, has returned from America to settle down; but because he once killed a man in the ring by accident, he refuses to use his fists no matter what the provocation. Naturally, this eccentricity sits badly with the locals, who, ignorant of its motive, belabor him for cowardice every time he backs away from a potential brawl. For a while, Ford seems to be using him to develop a critique of Irish machismo. But comes the climax, a proposed battle with his wife Mary Kate's muscle-brained brother Will, and does Sean keep his fists unclenched? No, he piles into logy Will, and the two beefy oxen crunch up a few props but no bones before reconciling with slaphappy camaraderie. In other words, Sean never really had to worry about his punching power after all. By begging his central question in this tricky way, Ford reduces the film to a pack of postcards, visually pretty, otherwise not very revealing.

Machismo also rots most of the performances in Ford's films; his actors generally rely on posiness and stale mannerisms. John Wayne's cast-iron emoting is typical, though many are too enthralled by the mystique of stardom to care. A major presence but a highly limited actor, he can (despite his own protest to the contrary in *Film Comment*, September - October 1972) make only cosmetic changes from role to role, with the result that, however important he may be as a kind of mythic figure, he never really plays anybody but himself. McBride and Wil-



THE INFORMER

lington call him a mysterious actor; and in the sense that there is something mysterious about all stardom, perhaps he is. But is there any star whose performances are less mysterious? As a callow outlaw in *Stagecoach*, or an aging captain in *Yellow Ribbon*, or a naval officer in transit between bumptious youth and disappointed maturity in *The Wings of Eagles*, or an ambiguous man-in-the-middle in *Liberty Valance*, Wayne is essentially the same: earnest, chivalrous, coy, stalwart, lumbering, slow-talking, self-consciously masculine. If he is winning in the first film, slumpy in the next two, and moving in the last, that is primarily because of the different contexts in which his persona is placed. More than anyone else, he incarnates the machismo of Ford's work; like Ford, he projects a distrust of "feminine" emotions. Probably no major star of either sex is less convincing on the screen as a lover.

But he can hold the screen regardless because, like every star, he has an identity which almost makes acting irrelevant; this is close to a definition of traditional stardom. But most other Ford actors—Ward Bond, Harry Carey, Jr., Hank Worden, John Qualen, and the rest—have even skimpier repertoires of expression and gesture without anything close to Wayne's compensating aura and stature. So when they trot out their schticks, when they strain to be tough, manly, boyish, folksy, gruff, or deliriously senile,



THE QUIET MAN ▶



THEY
WERE
EXPENDABLE

they can do no more than push their tired routines long past the point where, comatose at the outset, they have stiffened into rigor mortis. It may be significant that the rare subtle performances in Ford's films—such as Robert Montgomery's expressively understated PT boat commander in *They Were Expendable* or Donald Crisp's robust, yeomanly paterfamilias in *How Green Was My Valley*—generally come from actors who were not really part of Ford's stock company.

"Stock company" does not necessarily mean the same for, say, an Ingmar Bergman as it does for a John Ford. Everyone knows that "Ingmar Bergman" is also an artistic collective whose members, collaborating frequently with him, enrich his work while extending their own possibilities in ways that neither could do separately. But Bergman has never had to fight for survival in Hollywood. Consequently, he works often with the same people solely because they are vital to his art. But a Hollywood director, even a big one like Ford, could not (and in most cases still cannot) take for granted his freedom from hackers and meddlers of the front office. In such a situation, a stock company becomes, like cutting in the camera à la Hitchcock, one more way to increase a director's control over his movies in an industry hostile to personal expression. By parcelling out most of the roles

in each film to friends and cronies, Ford could reduce the number of enemies ready to try and sabotage his work.

But this kind of casting can become perfunctory. It tends to suit actors who are content to trot out their tricks instead of trying anything risky (which they probably couldn't bring off in the first place). This, in turn, encourages paint-by-numbers screenwriting, in which characters, lines, and details must be color-toned to match the same old bunch of zeroes in film after film. As a result, the stock company protects the director not only from interference but also from fresh, challenging, even fearsome influences which might enrich his work. When a director like Ford must confront realities which oppose his beliefs and feelings too powerfully, he can beat a hasty retreat to his cozy circle of pals and sidekicks, where he can find reassurance that all is well after all. Only a stock company as talented as Bergman's could have helped Ford escape this prison which he mistook for a fortress.

The concept of art also disturbed Ford, as his interviews reveal. This is usually ascribed to his innate modesty about his "job of work," his disinclination to spell out the objectives of his films like failed jokes or to have the unpretentious activity which he enjoyed so much be given such a high-and-mighty title. No doubt this is all

true, but it is not the whole truth. Many, perhaps most, Americans have always been leery of art, largely because they consider it unmasculine to be an artist. According to this view, an artist is not really a man unless he manages to make a lot of money from it, in which case he becomes a businessman. (For women, art is a suitable pastime because it is just like crocheting doilies.) This macho line can be found at one extreme in the old saw that all male ballet dancers are homosexuals and at the other end in the frequent ridicule of their profession by American actors, especially male movie actors who plaintively moan the classic line, "Is this any way for a grown man to be making a living?"

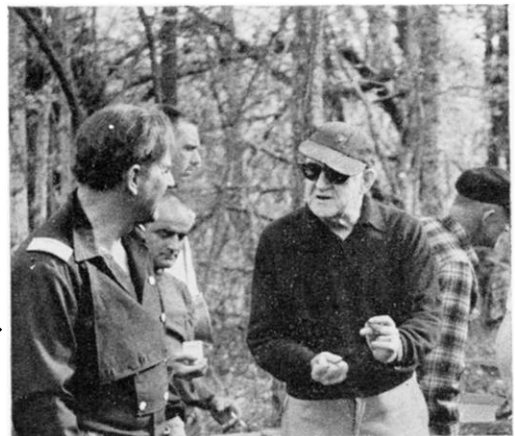
Like many other directors who were active in the industry almost from the beginning (often as actors), Ford led a rough-and-tumble life which left little time for contemplation of aesthetic niceties even if he had been inclined towards it. Almost every available description of Hollywood's infancy indicates that it was a kind of madhouse, that movie-making was a wild, exhausting, exciting, often dangerous game. The men who played it did not have to worry about being thought unmasculine because the whole strenuous, frantic adventure called for the derring-do of steeplejacks and the stamina of ditchdiggers. They could make movies (not films) "innocently," unself-consciously, without the stigma of "artist" getting in the way.

Now, when movies are more often regarded as potential works of art in the more formal sense of the term, many of the old-line directors who survive that bold, roughhousing period which has gone forever now confront critics and interviewers eager to probe their "visions." Almost invariably, they deny that what they did had any connection with art; they prefer to be treated as plain craftsmen, which is what most of them were. Since few are intellectuals themselves, they are understandably uncomfortable with the methods and jargons of intellectuals, who can be naive as well as condescending. Naturally, too, they recall how suspiciously the Cohns and Mayers and Warners regarded artistic aspirations; witness the stir caused in its day

by Capra's "one man, one film" declaration, or read the Selznick memo (in the Avon paperback, p. 455-457) which castigates King Vidor for calling movies an art form. But it also seems probable that the idea of letting themselves be regarded as artists conflicted intensely with their sense of masculinity.

Ford usually parried interviewers asking about his art. I was part of a group at UCLA which watched him, a couple of years before his death, tangle with a professor and several students who were trying to draw him out about his films. Resplendent in his black eye patch and truculent as an old condor, he had himself a grand time: cocking his deaf ear, making questioners shout and reshout until their questions turned to gibberish, staring at them balefully, debunking the more arcane queries by denying that he remembered the movie, reducing the professor to a basket case by poking fun at his seriousness. It was a hilarious, expert performance, in its way rather admirable, for many of the questions were pompous and many of the questioners incapable of accepting art unless it had been chewed over in advance by the artist. It was also refreshing to observe such a lack of self-importance in an era when so many doodlers, scribblers, and media freaks, who will never achieve a fraction of what Ford achieved, glibly call themselves artists and pontificate into every available ear about their aesthetics.

Yet this irascible cowboy persona seemed as much a defense mechanism as the stock company was. On this occasion, Ford appeared to be both pleased and annoyed to be treated as an artist; and the brawling, sentimental celebrations



Ford's "cowboy persona" ►

of masculinity in his films (which go back at least as far as *The Blue Eagle*, 1926) express unconsciously the same ambivalence. Ford was artistically ambitious. The elaborate patterns of motif, theme, attitude, detail, characterization, situation, and image which his admirers have so thoroughly traced, not to mention the highly self-conscious artiness of a film like *The Fugitive* (another of his favorites), are not the products of mere unassuming craftsmanship. But the feminine connotations of art bothered him; thinking of himself as an artist conflicted too sharply with his machismo. Other hard-nosed action directors like Henry Hathaway and Raoul Walsh shared the machismo; but they did not have Ford's artistic aspirations, his complex of beliefs and feelings seeking expression, so they were not so split. Others who were not typed as action directors, such as Mitchell Leisen, Roy Del Ruth, or Jack Conway, made movies which were neither unduly macho-ridden nor personally expressive. They were comfortable as skilled studio craftsmen; they were not straining for art. Part of Ford was, but he couldn't reconcile this part with his machismo. He never, it seems, entirely came to terms with his vocation. As a result, he was usually hamstrung when faced with challenges to his beliefs, which called for more self-conscious artistic effort. He could neither avoid them nor confront them.

So many of his later films display this inadequacy: *The Long Gray Line*, with its hollow affirmation of dated platitudes, its rote application of past devices (like the coda which brings back dead characters as if for an encore to a musical comedy); *Two Rode Together*, an appalling shambles of sloppy plotting, trite narrative gimmicks, sticky romance, and easy liberalism *vis-à-vis* a young Mexican woman held captive by the Indians, bearable only because James Stewart entertainingly plays up the jaunty cynicism of his character and because Manny Farber was inspired to pepper it with buckshot in a witty review; *Donovan's Reef*, a shallow mishmash with some melodious music and a few poetic images; the massive ruin of *Cheyenne Autumn*.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance is a beautiful, elegiac credo, but it is excessively bound to genre conventions. The stock figures and devices were just about played out by the time the film was made; they cannot truly bear the weight of its ambitions. For instance, Andy Devine, who plays young and old versions of one character, cannot generate emotion because his mannerisms are just too hackneyed; ritual is one thing, but this is cliché. And as for the legend which must be printed "when the legend becomes fact," it is remote from real legends and the real facts which they obscured. The shades of venerable stereotypes hang too heavily over this fable; it is too much a meditation on a lost genre to be fully satisfying as a meditation on a lost world. "Genre," like "stock company," can be another cell in the same prison.

Seven Women suggests that, late in the day, Ford may have begun to seek a way out of his prison. Most of the characters in this wildly erratic study of a besieged mission in 1930's China are women. Ford's male stock company is largely absent, and those who are present (Mike Mazurki and Woody Strode) parody their usual roles. The heroine, a doctor, is not only single but strong and forthright, and Ford the conservative Catholic presents her suicide as a bleakly heroic act. At the same time, the mission leader, who would have been the heroine in the customary Ford film, is an arrogant, hysterical bigot who caves in under pressure. Much of the acting and the dialogue are very clumsy, and the irreligious doctor's "outrageousness" is quite carefully limited. An area of confusion in the film may be indicated by Ford's comment to Peter Bogdanovich that she "got in with this bunch of kooks and started acting like a human being." Kooks the others certainly are, but when does she not act like a human being? Yet there are moments of unusual delicacy rightly praised by the film's admirers: the leader's confession that mere faith in God can no longer sustain her, the doctor's walk to death in a kimono; the quick fade-out on her last moment of life. Each screening I've attended of this ungainly movie had its contingent of laugh-

TOBACCO
ROAD



ers who chose to view it as camp, but its moments of intensity—and the feeling which it communicates of Ford groping towards something new for him—tip the balance in its favor.

Robert Chappetta has written that "John Ford's films are simple and traditional in meaning, but we lose something in not being able to respond to them." Indeed they are, and indeed we do. But when criticism turns to idolatry, when it tries to overinflate the films' real qualities into proofs of artistry equal to that of Shakespeare or Beethoven or whatever truly great artist in whatever medium you care to name, disappointment is the inevitable response. In such a stifling critical climate, it may be a blessing that some of Ford's best films, like the funny, autumnal *Tobacco Road* (1941) or the lively, crazy-quilt silent *Three Bad Men* (1926) have been comparatively neglected. Once, this kind of hyperbole may have had its function, when movies, especially American movies, were ignored by snobbish, ignorant worshippers of "high culture." But now that their value and artistic potential have long been established for all but the most incorrigible mossbacks, this kind of secretly defensive overpraise is value-

less tactically as it always was critically. Furthermore, it plays right into the hands of today's moguls, packagers, and ex-hairdressers, who want to remake the films of yesteryear while scorning fresher, more innovative projects. Grant Ford all due honor, watch his films—but don't print the legend.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Alexander Jacobs suggested many of the key ideas in this article.

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